DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 845 PS 011 987

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TITLE The Grandparenting Role in Our Changing Society and Its Influence on the Development of Children.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 17p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (San Francisco, CA, November 21-24, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement: *Child Rearing: *Family Relationship: *Grandparents: *Individual Characteristics: Life Style: Older Adults: *Parent Responsibility: Parent Role: Population Trends: Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS Parenting

ABSTRACT

More people in the United States today are living to grandparenting age than ever before. Yet little is known about grandparenting. Although the research is limited, there seem to be factors that influence the grandparenting role for grandparents, and thus influence children and grandchildren. For example many of these older individuals are maintaining households that are frequently located in areas distant from their children or grandchildren. Older individuals, also, have attained a higher educational level than their predecessors. Furthermore, the life-styles of younger persons (e.g. increased divorce rates, increased employment of women, and teenage pregnancy) may place older individuals in positions which involve roles and responsibilities not ordinarily associated with old age. To date however, there is no indication that the grandparent will be as significant a person in the development of children as the parent. Given the predicted changing complexion of the over-65 population, further research could ensure the utilization of a resource that in the past has been either under-utilized or unrecognized. Essentially, grandparents could add another dimension in the development of young children. (Author/RH)

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The Grandparenting Role in Our Changing Society

and

Its Influence on the Development of Children

by

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PS011987

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Presented at National Association for the Education of Young Children, San Francisco, 1980.

Abstract

More people in the United States today are living to grandparenting age than ever before. In addition, these older individuals are maintaining their own independent households frequently in different geographic areas than their children or grandchildren. Older individuals, also, have attained a higher educational level than this group in years past. Furthermore, the life-styles of younger persons (e.g. increased divorce rates, increased employment of women, and teenage pregnancy) may place older individuals in positions to assume roles and responsibilities not ordinarily associated with old age.

Yet, little is known about grandparenting. Although the research is fairly limited, there seem to be factors that influence the grandparenting role for grandparents, thus children and grandchildren. There is no indication, to date, that the grandparent will be as significant a person in the development of children as the parent. Given the predicted changing complexion of the over-65 population, further research could insure the utilization of a resource that, in the past, has been under-utilized unrecognized. Thus grandparents could add another dimension in the development of young children.

Society has made some implicit assumptions of the importance of grandparents and the roles they play for grandchildren. Those assumptions are reflected in articles and poems printed in the popular literature. For example, the following is an essay purportedly written by a third grader that appeared in a newspaper:

> A grandmother is a lady who has no children of her own. She likes other people's little girls. A grandfather is a man grandmother. He goes for walks with boys. And they talk about fishing and tractors and things like that. Grandmothers don't have to do anything except be there. They're old so they shouldn't play hard or run. It is enough if they drive us to the market where the pretend horse is and have lots of dimes ready. Or if they take us for walks they should slow down passed things like pretty leaves or caterpillars. They should never say "Hurry up!" Usually they are fat but not too fat to tie shoes. They wear funny glasses and underwear. They can take their teeth and gums off. It is better that they don't typewrite or play cards except with us. They don't have to be smart, only answer questions like "Why do dogs hate cats?" and "How come God isn't married?" They don't talk baby talk like visitors do because it is too hard to understand. When they read to us they don't skip words or mind if it is the same story again. Everybody should try to have one especially if you don't have television because grandmothers are grownups who have time.

or this poem by Harriet B. McCormack:

> Grandmothers have a special place
> One of highest acclaim it is true
> For grandmothers have unusual charm
> In the things they know how to do.
> They can tell stories of by-gone times.
> They can mend our hearts when they break.
> They soothe our woes and dry our tears.
> For grandmothers have the time to take.

Yet when we look to the literature about grandparents and grandparenting, we find very little information. The literature that does exist seems to fall into some major categories: psychoanalytic perspective on grandparenting, roles and styles of grandparenting, significance of grandparenthood, factors affecting grandparenting and the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Psychoanalytic Perspective on Grandparenting

Prior to the 1960's the study of grandparenting could be found primarily in the psychoanalytic literature. The focus of such studies was almost exclusively the influence of the grandmother in the emotional or behavioral

problems of her grandchildren. This emphasis was evidenced in the titles of articles published at the time, for example, "Significance of Grandmothers on the Psychopathology of Children," (LaBarre, Jessner and Ussery, 1960); "Grandma Made Johnny Delinquent" (Strauss, 1943) and "The Grandmother: A Problem in Child-Rearing" (Vollmer, 1957). The general conclusion reached by these psychoanalytic investigators was the grandparent, especially the grandmother, was a powerful influence in the families of the children with emotional and behavioral problems. In particular, an unresolved conflict between grandmother and daughter in establishing a clear definition of who was playing the role of parent was seen as a major contributor to the child's difficulties (LaBarre, Jessner and Ussery, 1960; Borden, 1946; Vollmer, 1937).

Roles and Styles of Grandparenting

What role grandparents play in the nuclear family is another question that has been researched. In 1946, Von Hentig suggested that it was only when the nuclear family structure was threatened that grandparents assumed a role of critical importance. Additional investigations have shown that grandparents serve as a source of support during periods of illness, crisis or disaster within the nuclear family (Hill, 1949; Shanas, 1962; Young, 1954). Yet other studies have indicated that the grandparents' influence need not necessarily be limited to emergency situations. Grandparents have been found to take care of their grandchildren to enable adult family members to work (Shanas, 1967). They may also provide financial aid to the nuclear family (Sussman, 1953) or indirectly help them by way of gifts to the grandchildren or assist with the grandchildren's educational expenses (Bell, 1968). Grandparents have been termed the chroniclers of the past and the mechanism for keeping family history alive (Nimkoff, 1961). Older family members, such as grandparents, are considered the ones to pass on a type of wisdom by which younger members learn the criteria for mate selection, methods of child-rearing

and the skills for maintaining harmony and teamwork within the kinship group (Faris, 1947).

In addition to the wide variety of functions of grandparenthood, there appears a number of ways in which grandparents ultimately play out their role. The styles of grandparenting are:

1. Formal--clear demarcations between parents' and grandparents' roles. Grandparents only provide special treats and occasional minor services.

2. Fun-Seeker--grandparenting is a leisure activity as a self-indulgence.

3. Surrogate Parent--mostly true for grandmothers when mothers are employed or incapacitated.

4. Reservior of Family Wisdom--mostly true of grandfathers who are dispensers of a special skill.

5. Distant Figure--a benevolent but infrequent visitor who emerges from the shadows on holidays and other ritual occasions.

The categorization of grandparenting is part of the 1964 Neugarten and Weinstein study, "The Changing American Grandparent," which is probably the best known and/or most frequently cited research on grandparenting.

Significance of Grandparenthood

Grandparenthood is not chosen but imposed by their adult children. What it means and how important it is to be a grandparent for grandparents seems to be defined more in terms of how having grandchildren enhances their egos than their relationship with their grandchildren. Fried and Stern (1948), found, as had Neugarten and Weinstein (1964), that grandparenthood has significance for grandparents because they see:

1. grandchildren as a source of biological renewal for them;
2. grandchildren as a source of emotional self-fulfillment;
3. themselves as a resource person contributing to their grandchildren's welfare; or
4. personal satisfaction as a result of vicarious accomplishments of their grandchildren.

Rosow (1967) noted that grandparents talk about what they do for their grandchildren or what their grandchildren do for them and rarely talk about

what they do together or what they mean to each other. Wood and Robertson (1976) compared individual subjective descriptions of the grandparenting role with how the ways the grandparenting role was carried out. They concluded that grandparents verbally attribute a great deal of significance to their role as grandparents but this perceived importance is not reflected in the actual involvement they have with their grandchildren. For example, most grandparents reported that they did baby-sit with their grandchildren, take them to the zoo, read to them, give them gifts but they did these things only a few times a year.

Factors Affecting Grandparenting

Throughout the literature on grandparenting, there are factors which seem to further define the grandparenting role. Some relate specifically to grandparents themselves and others deal with the perceived relationship between grandparents and the nuclear family.

Age of the grandparents seems to be one factor that affects the style of grandparenting. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) found the formal grandparenting style was most common for grandparents over 65 years of age while the fun seeker or distant figure style predominates for the under-65 grandparent. Roles grandparents have within the nuclear family seem to be another determining factor. Apple (1954) showed that grandparents who are removed from family authority tend to be indulgent and warm with their grandchildren in contrast to grandparents who have maintained economic power and prestige within the family. These grandparents tend to be more authoritarian and formal with their grandchildren.

The perceived quality of the relationship between grandparents and the nuclear family seems to affect the degree of satisfaction both generations have with the grandparenting role. For example, Lopata (1964) interviewed widows about their feelings of closeness to their grandchildren. The widows

reported that tension between their adult children and themselves was a factor inhibiting their being able to be a grandparent to their grandchildren. From the adult children's perspectives, Johnson and Bursk (1977) found that adult children perceived a higher quality of relationship with their parents when:

1. both shared similar values;
2. the relationship was based on mutual respect and trust; and
3. the relationship was based on realistic perceptions of each other.

In the same study adult children tended to rate the quality of the grandparent-adult children relationship as better when the grandparents were fairly active, busy in a variety of activities and in good health. Grandparents being in good health was a particularly significant factor in determining the quality of the grandparent-adult children relationship. Boyd (1969) concurred with Johnson and Bursk and added that the grandparenting role was further enhanced if the grandparents maintained their own home and made it an attractive place for family gatherings and vacations for grandchildren.

Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship

There has been very little examination of the role of grandparents specifically in terms of grandchildren. The importance of older persons to young children has been demonstrated outside the family through such programs as the Foster Grandparent Program. The Foster Grandparent Program has shown that having poverty-level retired persons act as surrogate grandparents for emotionally deprived children has alleviated some of the symptoms traditionally associated with these children such as depression, poor intellectual functioning and social immaturity (Saltz, 1970). In addition, the presence of grandparents seems to affect the grandchildren's perceptions of older people. Bekker and Taylor (1966) examined the influence of the number of generations in a young person's own family on the perception of age. They found that students with living great-grandparents perceived grandparents as having fewer characteristics of old age than students with no living great-grandparents. Ivester and King (1977) reported that when ninth and twelfth

graders in Danielsville, Georgia, had contact with their grandparents they had a more positive attitude toward older people in general.

Yet, the significance of grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren seems to be questionable given the findings of several research studies. Adams (1968) reported that the adult grandchildren felt closer to uncles and aunts than to their grandparents. Looft (1971) asked persons of various ages to name the principle source, as well as other important sources, of knowledge about the world for school-age children and adolescents. Parents and peers were viewed as the transmittors of this information and no mention was made of grandparents.

To further complicate the issue, there is some evidence indicating that the grandparent-grandchild relationship has different meanings depending upon the developmental age of the grandchild. In "Grandparenthood from the Perspective of the Developing Child" Kahana and Kahana (1970) reported that:

1. Children ages 4-5 years want grandparents who are indulgent;
2. Eight and nine year old children want active and fun sharing grandparents; and
3. Eleven and twelve year old children appear to be growing distant from their grandparents.

Robertson (1976) found the most significant type of relationship adult grandchildren wanted with their grandparents was one based on emotional gratification.

Do We Need to Study Grandparenting?

As can be seen the approach in studying grandparenting has been, at best, a potpourri. This is true despite the fact that

1. approximately 75% of the people over 65 in the United States having living grandchildren (Harris and Associates, 1975);
2. approximately 75% of grandparents see their grandchildren at least once every week or two (Harris and Associates, 1975); and

3. nearly half of all grandparents see their grandchildren every day or so (Atchley, 1977).

To date, the inattention in the study of grandparenting could be attributed to high value placed on the isolation and independence of the nuclear family in child-rearing (Troll, 1971). Existing literature about the role of grandparents in the nuclear family and the above information about the frequency of contact between grandparent and grandchildren would seem to indicate that the nuclear family is not as isolated as once thought. These factors make the study of the grandparent role a viable one for further investigation. In addition, there are some anticipated shifts in the profile of the older American population that may have dramatic affect on society and the nuclear family in particular.

Number of Older Americans

The percentage of older Americans has increased at a faster rate than the total population. Between 1900 and 1970, the total population of the United States grew to almost three times its 1900 size while the over-65 segment grew by seven times its 1900 size (Brotman, 1977). The over-65 population now comprises 10.5 percent of the total population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Harris (1978) attributed this increased number of living older Americans to three factors: 1) the high birth rate of the late 19th and early 20th century, 2) the high immigration rate prior to World War I, and 3) the dramatic increase in life expectancy during the 20th century.

The number of older persons is expected to steadily increase in the future. Assuming a stable fertility and mortality rate, the over-65 population will increase to 11.7 percent by 1990; 15 percent in 2020; and by 2030, 17 percent of the total United States population (Harris, 1978).

Living Arrangements of Older Americans

There has been an increase in the number of persons over 65 who are

living alone and maintaining their own households. In 1976, more than eight of every ten older men and six of every ten older women lived in family settings. The predominant living arrangement for the older widow is to live alone rather than with another family. For example, six of every 10 older widows live alone while two of ten live with another family member (Harris, 1978).

When older Americans maintain their own living arrangements they tend to choose to live in different geographic areas than the under-65 population. It appears that areas with higher proportions of older persons (e.g. Florida) are those which have experienced a substantial outmigration of young persons or a substantial immigration of retirees while areas with a low percentage of older persons (e.g. Alaska, Hawaii, New Mexico) have either a large immigration of young persons or have a relatively high birth rate (Harris, 1978). Within the geographic areas, the over-65 population is disproportionately represented in the central city areas and small towns (Harris, 1978). The high proportion of older persons in the central city areas would seem to be a result of young persons, especially those with young children, living in the suburban areas. In terms of older persons living in small towns, the high proportion would seem to reflect the large numbers of young persons moving to other areas to live and farmers moving to the nearest small community to retire.

Educational Level of Older Americans

There is, also, a trend toward a higher level of educational attainment for the over-65 population. It has been predicted that by 1990, nearly one-half of the over-65 population will be high school graduates as compared to 35 percent in 1975 and 23 percent in 1965 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Because educational attainment is a key determinant of one's life situation, this trend toward higher educational attainment could indicate an improving life condition for older Americans.

Lifestyles of Adults Affecting Older Americans

The life styles of their children may put older parents in positions to assume roles and responsibilities not ordinarily associated with old age. Because of an increase in divorce, increased employment among women and in early teenage pregnancy, adult children may more frequently be asking their parents to assume part and/or all rearing of their young children. Though specific information is unavailable regarding the actual frequency with which this situation occurs, there are some statistics available that make this assumption appear valid. Firstly, it is estimated that nearly one-half of all children born in the 1970's will, by the time they are eighteen years of age, have spent at least a portion of their lives in a single-parent situation (Glick & Norton, 1977); generally with a mother who is divorced (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979a). Secondly, 65.7% of all married women living with their husbands, 78.6% of all women separated from their husbands and 85.5% of all divorced women are in the labor force and have children under the age of six (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979b). These families are probably in need of child care. Further, the United States Census Bureau (1979b) reported that 33.8% of 3-6 year old children who had employed mothers are cared for by relatives other than a parent. Though there is no breakdown of who the care-providing relative is, grandparents must certainly be involved. Thirdly, nearly one birth in five in the United States is to a teenage mother (Zero Population Growth, Note 1), 85% of whom keep their children (Alan Guttmacher Institute, Note 2). Because of the youth of this group of mothers, grandparents frequently assume some of the child-rearing responsibility for this grandchild.

Conclusions

The changing characteristics and roles of the ever increasing number of older Americans is likely having a dramatic effect on the children with

whom they interact. But because of their increased independence in living arrangements and the often great geographic distance between grandparents and their adult children and grandchildren, there may be a problem insuring that grandchildren get an opportunity to know their grandparents. Because of the higher educational levels of present-day grandparents, they would seem to have something more than the typical gift or "vacation spot" to offer their grandchildren. The need for a clearer understanding of the grandparenting would seem to be self-evident given these factors.

Although there is no indication, to date, that the grandparent will ever be as significant a person in the development of children as that of the parent, in the past, grandparents may have been under utilized and/or unrecognized. Thus, systematic study of grandparenting could add another dimension to the development process of young children.

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